

(Oct. 1990)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Best, Benjamin W., Houseother names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 2193 Mewborn Church Road (SR 1146)☐ not for publication N/Acity or town Jason☒ vicinitystate North Carolina code NC county Greene code 079 zip code 28580

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☐ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Sherry Brown SH-PO 1/20/06

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- ☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet

- ☐ determined eligible for the
National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet

- ☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register.

- ☐ removed from the National
Register.

- ☐ other,

(explain:)

Benjamin W. Best House
Name of Property

Greene County, NC
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed
in the National Register**

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: Single Dwelling

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: Single Dwelling

Domestic: Secondary Structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Greek Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK/CONCRETE

walls WOOD: Weatherboard

roof METAL: Tin

other CONCRETE

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Benjamin W. Best House
Name of Property

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County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☒ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

Circa 1850

Significant Dates

Circa 1850

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey
- #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

Benjamin W. Best House
Name of Property

Greene County, NC
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Three acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 249200 3922000
Zone Easting Northing
2 _____

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing
4 _____

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Heather Fearnbach and Penne Sandbeck
organization consultants date January 6, 2005
street & number P. O. Box 6363 telephone 919-832-7935
city or town Raleigh state NC zip code 27628

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name C. Osmond and Mary Betty Kearney
street & number 2029 Mewborn Church Road telephone 252-747-5054
city or town Snow Hill state NC zip code 28580

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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Benjamin W. Best House
Greene County, NC

7. Narrative Description

Benjamin W. Best House Circa 1850 Contributing Building

The Benjamin W. Best House is located on the east side of Mewborn Church Road, three miles northeast of the small rural community of Jason in western Greene County, within North Carolina's Coastal Plain. As it is situated, the Best House is set back approximately two hundred feet from the road, facing west. The 1850 timber frame house is surrounded by agricultural fields as it had been at its original location, ten miles north in Bull Head Township's Lindell community. The home tract is fifty-two acres, but only the three acres around the house are included in the nominated parcel.

As stated above, this building was originally sited ten miles north in northwestern Greene County's Bull Head Township, constructed for planter Benjamin W. Best in 1850. Topography at each location is comparable as this immediate region, comprising both Lindell and Jason, consists of sloping upland terrain with the sandy, loamy soil type ideal for tobacco cultivation. Decline of tobacco-based agriculture has not affected this region as dramatically as nearby Wayne or Wilson counties, because this section of western and northwestern Greene County has relied upon livestock and fowl production, particularly turkeys, since the early twentieth century.

Pre-1995 documentary photographs of the Benjamin W. Best House at its original location, other than an early twentieth-century photograph of Best family descendants on the altered front porch, do not exist. Bill Murphy, a local historian who conducted an architectural survey of Greene County in 1995 and 1996 co-sponsored by the Greene County Bicentennial Committee and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, took photographs of the house in early 1995. Neglected and vacant for decades, the two-story house stood two hundred feet northeast of Secondary Road 1058, its front elevation facing directly southwest. At that site, the house rested on a brick pier foundation with concrete block infill (though the rear ell only had brick piers, and no infill), and was framed by two exterior end, single-shoulder brick chimneys crowned by corbel caps; the one-and-a-half story rear ell's chimney had been removed some years prior. Original exterior features had been augmented during the late twentieth century; for example, the house's front elevation had a one-story hip roof porch but, as its wood floor had been removed, its chamfered support posts rested on small brick piers that, in turn, were on a cement slab floor. According to Murphy's field notes, surviving

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Benjamin W. Best House
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agricultural buildings located north of the house included two tobacco barns, a shed, and a pack barn where harvested tobacco was stored; none of these outbuildings dated to before 1940.¹ Other than remnants of a brick well, there were no surviving domestic outbuildings or structures to accompany the house. Surviving plantings immediately around the house included overgrown privet, mature pecan trees, crape myrtles, and cedar trees.²

When threatened by demolition in 1998, locals brought the house to the attention of Preservation North Carolina (PNC), the state's non-profit historic preservation agency, which operates a revolving fund for historic houses for sale. After being advertised through PNC's real estate publication, the Benjamin W. Best House was subsequently bought and moved to its current location. At the time of its April 1998 move, the pack barn, an open shed, and two tobacco barns remained near the house, in addition to a few crape myrtles and pecan trees.

The house itself remains intact. It is a weatherboarded, Greek Revival-style dwelling with a low hip roof, box cornices, a wide frieze, and corner pilasters decorated by a bead. The two-story, three-bay, single-pile building retains its original two-story rear ell thought to have been built just before the main block. The gable ell, two bays wide and two rooms deep, has more modest exterior decoration, but with comparable corner pilasters. House and ell rest on concrete piers with a brick veneer, conforming to their original brick pier supports. When the house was moved in 1998, its original 7:1 common bond exterior end chimneys were of soft, poorly-fired brick and could not be moved with the house.³ However, the current owners of the house replicated these chimneys with ones of comparable but better-fired brick. A standing-seam metal roof protects the main block of the house and its rear ells.

¹ Bill Murphy, field notes and photography, Benjamin W. Best House. State Historic Preservation Office survey files, Raleigh, NC. Murphy's photographs also show that there were bulk barns, metal structures for curing tobacco that, by 1970, had made more traditional tobacco barns obsolete.

² Murphy field notes. Generally, pecan trees and crape myrtles are an early twentieth-century landscaping feature in eastern North Carolina, although farmers in nearby Wayne County were planting pecan groves by the late 1880s. Cedar trees, the "poor man's magnolia", are a predominant landscaping feature continuing from the antebellum period.

³ On several occasions the house owners, Osmond and Mary Betty Kearney, have told Penne Sandbeck (the nomination's co-author) that the house mover, Billy Tyson, advised them not to try to move the chimneys. A photograph taken the day of the house's move, April 7, 1998, shows part of the crumbled brick chimney on site; according to the Kearneys, the chimneys more or less dissolved when separated from the house.

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Fenestration includes double-hung nine-over-nine, nine-over-six, and six-over-six sash windows. Most of the sashes are original, although some are twentieth-century replicas, and glass panes salvaged from a local mid-nineteenth-century house demolished in 2000. The first floor windows are taller than the second floor windows, in proportion to the higher ceilings in the downstairs rooms, as well as adherence to classical precepts. Two-part architraves with Greek Revival style backband moldings and tiny square corner blocks surmount plainly finished window sills. The central entrance shares the same trim treatment. An eight-light fixed transom and four-light sidelights illuminate the central hallway.

The deteriorated full-width front porch was demolished prior to the house's relocation. Surviving pilasters on the façade and mortises for the framing members of the original portico provide architectural evidence that this portico was a center-bay structure with tapered posts and a flat roof, above which was a simple rail balustrade. The original second-story door opening to the portico's balcony was removed in the twentieth century along with its transom and sidelights but, thanks to clearly visible evidence of these former elements, all were restored in 2002. A one-story, shed roof side porch extending from the chimney on the south elevation to the rear of the original ell was rebuilt around 1900 and eventually removed; it has also been replaced by a comparable side porch. Tall chamfered posts from the earlier side porch have been reutilized for their original purpose.

Two parlors on the first floor and two bedrooms on the second floor flank the main block's central stair hall. The hall itself retains its plain finish; the staircase, with square balusters, rounded handrails and square newel posts with molded caps, rises in two flights with a full-width landing to the upstairs central hall. Walls and ceilings of the hall are sheathed with wide, flush boards. The scale of the hall and the prominent positioning of the staircase indicate its status as the house's primary entrance. Remarkably, all of the hall's features are original and intact. Other rooms were originally finished with plaster walls and ceilings, which were mostly replaced with drywall in the mid-twentieth century. The drywall was in such poor condition that it, along with the remaining plaster, was removed when the house was moved. Removal of the drywall made it possible to view the house's heavy timber frame with down braced corners.

Heart-pine floors, beaded baseboards, transitional Federal-Greek Revival style mantels, and architraves with Greek Revival backband molding and small cornerblocks characterize the interior rooms of the Benjamin W. Best House, and all of these features are original to the house. Three of the original mantels are intact, each composed of paneled pilasters and architraves on either end of

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plain lintels. A raised-panel apron under the windows and two-vertical-panel doors complete the Greek Revival treatment of the interior space. The double-leaf door at the rear of the hall is an early twentieth-century replacement, with five raised horizontal panels on each side. The two-panel doors throughout the house are hung on butt hinges. There is also evidence of decorative painting, particularly a faux-maple graining on the east door located at the second story's south bedchamber.

The two-story ell appears to have been built shortly before the house's main block, and was probably the Best family's "starter dwelling." Its space originally functioned as a dining room on the first floor and a bedroom on the second. Architectural evidence indicates that an enclosed stair from the dining room originally provided access to the second floor rooms. In comparison to the main block, the ell is smaller but of comparable finish, from its original mantelpiece at the second story to window surrounds with decorated diminutive corner blocks identical to those seen in the rest of the house. 1995 photographs show that, as with the main block, the ell retained some of its plaster and lathing; it has since been carefully covered by sheetrock in such a way as not to obscure its decorative elements.

Overall, the alterations and additions made to the house since its move have not compromised the house's intrinsic integrity. The end chimneys and brick foundation piers were carefully designed and built to replicate the original chimneys and piers that were not able to be brought to the new location. Replacement elements, such as window sashes and panes, have been chosen to replicate the original windows. The one extension added to the house, the second rear ell at the east elevation's north end, is proportionately smaller than the original rear ell and unobtrusive in form and scale. The Benjamin W. Best House retains an extraordinarily high percentage of its original exterior elements and interior finish in addition to its entire heavy timber frame. In restoring earlier features of the house such as its center bilevel portico, it has achieved its front façade's original appearance.

Landscape - original and current house location

Documentary photographs of the Benjamin W. Best House at its original location, other than an early twentieth-century photograph of Best family descendants on the late nineteenth-century replacement front porch, do not exist, nor do plats other than the 1902 Exum plat. Plantings at the house's original location, documented in 1995, do not date from the house's antebellum or immediate post-Civil War periods although the crape myrtles, cedars, pecans, and other trees were probably planted, in keeping with regional landscape practices, during the early twentieth century. Accretion of agricultural outbuildings, overgrown shrubbery, and remnants of these early twentieth-century

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plantings surrounding the house at the time of its 1998 move created an “abandoned landscape”—something seen in many parts of the South as nineteenth-century plantation houses were going into the tenant system or being abandoned during and after the Great Depression—but not an authentic period landscape.

Examples of properties with intact nineteenth-century landscaping and plantings, due to economic and social changes within the last 150 years, are nearly impossible to find in North Carolina, unless such a place has remained in a family of means. North Carolina has not yet undertaken a systematic study of period landscapes on the order of other states, particularly Georgia.⁴ However, respective county architectural surveys and National Register nominations within the state have laid preliminary groundwork for such a study, and examples of documented period landscapes, though small, do exist. With North Carolina’s antebellum farmsteads such as Midway Plantation in Wake County and Walnut Grove in Bladen County, certain conventions appear to apply.⁵ Already, as Kniffen put it, “symbolic of economic attainment by agriculturalists...throughout the Upland South,” the archetypal two-story, side-gable residence, set back from the main road, was the complex’s focal point.⁶ The approach to the dwelling was a major component of the antebellum farmstead complex plan; in the case of Midway and Walnut Grove, access was via an axis to a circular, or quasi-circular, road. The defined nature of these approaches, contrasted with the haphazard landscaping and outbuilding arrangement seen at the Benjamin W. Best’s original site by 1998, would seem to indicate that the latter’s initial complex plan would have followed a comparable symmetry.

As the seat of a substantial 1850s farming operation, the Benjamin W. Best House was not merely a farmhouse but a statement of Benjamin W. Best’s social standing within Greene County’s gentry. The house’s wide corner pilasters, solid mass, and Greek Revival decoration denoted prosperity and substance. And the house’s center front portico, with its trabeated entrance and upper balcony, clearly indicated that such an entrance would demand a suitable approach.

⁴ In the late 1980s with the assistance of landscape historian Catherine Howett, Georgia Department of Natural Resources undertook a systematic study of historic residential landscapes resulting in *Georgia’s Living Places: Historic Houses in Their Landscaped Settings*, published in 1991.

⁵ Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 214-217; Kelly A. Lally, *The Historic Architecture of Wake County, North Carolina* (Raleigh: Thomson Shore for Wake County Government, 1994), pp. 42-47. Although located just within North Carolina’s eastern Piedmont region, Midway is close enough to the Coastal Plain to be considered a peer to the Benjamin W. Best House and comparable dwellings in Pitt, Greene, and Wilson counties.

⁶ Fred B. Kniffen, “Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion,” in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 8-9.

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Unfortunately, due to lack of documentation, it is not known what the approach was—whether it was an allée of trees or shrubs, or another type of formal approach. Examples in the county of comparable period houses with allees include the circa-1870 Titus W. Carr House at Castoria (cedar and magnolia trees) and the circa-1855 Grimsley-Raspberry House near Snow Hill (oaks), both of which are in northern Greene County. Other mid-nineteenth-century houses in the county—the Edward and Sallie Coward House near Ormondsville, as well as the William H. Edmundson House and the Ruffin-Farmer-Dawson House in Lindell—lost their period plantings years ago.

Present plantings around the Benjamin W. Best House are not known to duplicate original or longtime plantings at its original location other than what was known at the site in the 1990s. Eight magnolia trees have been planted around the house in the last year, and there are plans, if deemed to be appropriate, to include pecan trees, crape myrtles, and cedars, which circled the house at its Bull Head location. The present vegetation itself is mutable in that it can, or could, be easily changed. Furthermore, present vegetation, in its design and scale, does not obscure the house and will not obscure the house in the future. Road and path features of the property offer a similar mutability. The principal roadway to the house is an unpaved dirt road directly south of the house that passes on to a turkey hatchery to the east. Other access areas, such as the circular drive at the house's front elevation and the parking area at the rear are not paved.

The house's new and previous locations share enough common features for compatibility to endure, beginning with comparable topography and the house's similar orientation and setback from the principal roadway, and ending with the continuity of agricultural surroundings. Open fields on either side of the Benjamin W. Best House, as well as the turkey hatchery and barns located east of the house and the westward woodlands and fields, place the house in a rural context comparable to the one at its original setting.

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Greene County, NC**House**
Circa 1930
Noncontributing Building

This one-story, three-bay, single-pile, frame house has a low hip roof and exposed rafter ends. The building, located approximately twenty-seven feet east of the Benjamin W. Best House, sits on brick piers with wood lattice skirting, and is protected by a standing-seam metal roof. Square Craftsman style wooden support posts spanned by a simple railing support the shed roof front porch. Plain wood steps with railings provide access to the front porch and side entrance to the house. The windows have six-over-one sash and both doors have glazed lights over horizontal panels.

Until 2002, the house was the second story of a two-story carriage house, built around 1930, and served as living quarters for domestic servants and guests. Part of a tourist home known as Miss Betty's Bed and Breakfast on Nash Street in nearby Wilson, North Carolina, the second story of this building was moved to the Benjamin W. Best House site from Wilson in 2002 and rehabilitated into a dwelling in 2003. The detached house cannot be seen from the Benjamin W. Best House's front elevation, and its distance of twenty-seven feet from rear wall of the original house was approved by the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office's Restoration Branch in 2002.

The smaller building is less than half of the Benjamin W. Best House's height, and its width extends for less than half of the main house's rear elevation. There are also no physical links between the house and the smaller building. No walkway, covered or open, exists between the two, or any other links denoting a relationship. Also, the former carriage house has not been retooled into a faux-Greek Revival appendage; it remains a small annex, retaining its original Craftsman style features. By these attributes, the house neither seriously compromises the historic character of the Benjamin W. Best House, nor creates an environment more formal than what existed at the Best House's original location.

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Greene County, NC**8. Statement of Significance****Summary Statement**

The Benjamin W. Best House meets the National Register's Criterion C requirements, as it is one of very few extant frame two-story Greek Revival dwellings built in northwestern Greene County during the twenty-five years preceding the Civil War. The circa-1850 house retains characteristic elements of regional Greek Revival style, including a low hip roof, an interior center hall plan, and finishes such as vertical two-panel doors, Greek Revival style wooden mantelpieces, and large nine-over-nine, double-hung sash windows at the first floor, and nine-over-six windows at the second. A signature treatment is the windows and doors' two-part architrave surrounds with backband molding and tiny corner blocks, representing a vernacular Greene County interpretation of the Greek Revival style. This treatment is primarily seen in the northwestern section of the county; of the remaining buildings possessing this distinctive feature, the Benjamin W. Best House is the most intact. The Benjamin W. Best House's integrity of workmanship and materials, furthermore, places it within a small local group of antebellum plantation dwellings, such as the Coward-Dixon House (National Register, also known as the Edward and Sallie Coward House) near Ormondsville, the Grimsley-Raspberry House (North Carolina Study List, also known as Grimsley Hall) north of Snow Hill, and the William H. Edmundson House in Lindell. Due to its inherent integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, as the house was relocated to a topographically compatible location a short distance from its original site, the Benjamin W. Best House meets Criteria Consideration B for Moved Properties.

Historical Background

Fertile soil drew white settlers to the backwoods region of North Carolina in the early eighteenth century after the conclusion of the Tuscarora War. By the mid-eighteenth century the area that would become Greene County, then a part of Dobbs County, was sparsely settled, with prime sites along Great Contentnea Creek serving as landings when the creek was high enough to allow for transportation of people and goods. Tobacco, naval stores and pork provided income for early settlers. Influential farmers and landowners built at least one tobacco warehouse along Great Contentnea Creek and constructed more permanent houses and outbuildings.⁷

Although humble, a handful of dwellings, such as the 1790s Dixon House near Hookerton, incorporated popular architectural styles into the local vernacular. Greene County has one

⁷ Abraham Sheppard, an eighteenth-century Greene County landowner, is known to have built a warehouse on Contentnea at Sheppard's Landing in the northwestern part of the county.

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exceptional survival from this period, the late Georgian-style dwelling known locally as the Henry Best House, located at the Fort Run community's southwestern edge.⁸ It was into this time and place, and probably in this very house, that Benjamin Williams Best was born in 1818.

Benjamin Best was the only son of Robert (also known as Robin) and Elizabeth Best, his father being the youngest of eleven children born to Benjamin Best Sr. (1740-1805), a prominent Dobbs County settler and landowner who built the circa 1790 Henry Best House⁹. Robert Best inherited the house upon his father's death. The Best family, like many eastern North Carolina "first families", came from Isle of Wight County, Virginia, during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. They settled in present-day Greene, Wayne, and Lenoir counties, and a small number of extant dwellings in that area are associated with them.¹⁰ Benjamin Williams Best took his middle name from his grandmother, Benjamin Best Sr.'s second wife Margaret, who was also from the immediate area.¹¹

Benjamin W. Best married Susan Louisa Exum of Wayne County on August 10, 1841, and the first of their six children, James Hiram Best, was born on February 16, 1843.¹² Moving northwest from Fort Run, closer to his wife's family, Best purchased land in the Bull Head area and constructed his substantial house and ell around 1850 just west of Beals Branch, a tributary of Nahunta Creek.¹³ By

⁸ Penne Smith Sandbeck, "Architectural Resources of Greene County, North Carolina." Draft Publication Manuscript (based upon Penne Smith, Greene County MPDF, September 1999), October 2002, pp. 8-13.

⁹ James M. Creech, *History of Greene County, North Carolina* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1979), p. 343. Creech's oral history of Greene County, though not always reliable, has extensive history on the Best family that, except for dating the Henry Best House to nearly fifty years before its actual construction, appears to be accurate. Traditionally, the house is associated with Henry Best I, Benjamin Best Sr.'s father. It is not improbable that an earlier house was on the site but it is very doubtful that Henry Best built the house.

¹⁰ These include the Benjamin Best House (Robert Best's brother) moved from Wayne County's northeastern Best Station community to Waynesborough Park near Goldsboro; the Henry Best House, the aforementioned very intact late Georgian dwelling located between Fort Run and Jason, in Greene County; and the Best-Harrison House, a transitional Georgian/Federal dwelling also located in Greene County between Snow Hill and Jason.

¹¹ Creech, p.343. Margaret Williams was from the Fort Run area, close to Jerusalem Methodist Church, established in the early nineteenth century and an important social hub for Fort Run and Tysons Marsh planters.

¹² Ancestry Tree World Project: John Lucas of Eastern North Carolina Descendants and Relatives, "Benjamin Best Sr. and Benjamin Williams Best," <http://awt.ancestry.com>. Also, Daniel Whitley Sr., "Robin Best", in *The Heritage of Wayne County, North Carolina* (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1982), entry 362.

¹³ Susan Exum Best's parents were John and Eleanor Ham Exum, who owned Pleasant Grove, a handsome Greek Revival/Italianate dwelling just north of present-day Eureka and west of the plantation community that appeared along Appletree and Nahunta Swamps in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The house passed to their son, William Jordan Exum, who was living there at the time of the Civil War. See Hinnant, "Descendants of John Exum and Eleanor Ham," in *Wayne County Heritage*, p. 227, Pezzoni and Smith, *Glimpses of Wayne*, pp. 72-73; and 1863 Confederate Engineers Survey Maps, Koerner Map (State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina). Koerner labeled Pleasant Grove as "W. T. Exum", a misspelling.

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that time his 900-acre plantation was worth \$5,400 and his livestock valued at \$1,195. In 1850 his farm produced eighty bushels of wheat, 1,500 bushels of Indian corn, thirty-five pounds of wool, 500 bushels of peas and beans, 800 bushels of sweet potatoes and 100 pounds of butter. Eighteen slaves worked on the farm, an average number for Greene County plantations during this period.¹⁴

By 1860, Benjamin Best's household included his wife, ten children, his brother-in-law W. P. Exum (a doctor) and three wards, two of whom were related to Susan Exum Best.¹⁵ His oldest sons, James Hiram and John Robert, were going to school but simultaneously helping him with the farm. In that year Best owned one thousand acres and thirty-six slaves, who lived in six houses on the property. His overseer, Merriman Ginn, and his family resided in a house just north of the Bests. Neighbors included other landowners such as the Scott Lane family, southwest over the Wayne County line, and William Williams and Westward Williams to the east. Two schoolhouses stood near Best's home and his farm was not far from a local mill—Saul's Mill on Nahunta Creek.¹⁶

Susan Best died in July 1863, soon after the birth of her last child, Eddie Exum, on June 20. Benjamin Best, unlike many antebellum farmers, managed to retain his land and property after the Civil War. In 1870 he owned 400 improved acres and 687 woodland and unimproved acres valued at \$6,100; farm implements and machinery worth \$350; and one horse, six mules, three milk cows, one ox, ten other cattle and twenty swine worth \$1200. The farm produced 1,250 bushels of Indian corn, thirty-eight bales of cotton, twenty pounds of wool, ten bushels of sweet potatoes, fifty pounds of butter, and ten tons of hay.¹⁷

By 1880, Benjamin Best had turned the management of his farm over to his son, John Robert Best.¹⁸ Three other sons and a housekeeper, Patsy Coltrain, also lived on the property. Some land had been sold, leaving 800 acres (500 tilled and 300 wooded). Farm production diversified somewhat with

¹⁴ United States Census, microfilm of manuscript census records (population, agriculture and slave schedules), Greene County, North Carolina, 1850. As with other North Carolina counties, some areas had many slaves and some none at all; Tysons Marsh, located south of Bull Head, had plantations with a substantial number of enslaved African Americans, but other areas of Greene County, particularly in its eastern and northern sections, had few slaves.

¹⁵ United States Census, microfilm of manuscript census records (population, agriculture and slave schedules), Greene County, North Carolina, 1860. Elisabeth and Robert Ham, who were respectively eighteen and sixteen years old and in possession of \$13,000 real estate between them, lived with the Bests.

¹⁶ 1863 Koerner Map. Also, Pezzoni and Smith, p. 190

¹⁷ United States Census, microfilm of manuscript census records (population and agriculture schedules), Greene County, North Carolina, 1870.

¹⁸ United States Census, Agriculture Schedule of Greene County, North Carolina, Bull Head Township. The acreage corresponding to John R. Best is the same as B. W. Best.

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the addition of 100 barnyard fowl, who produced fifty dozen eggs in 1879. Although the harvest of Indian corn and cotton was down to 450 bushels and sixteen bales respectively, the sweet potato crop was up to 100 bushels and 125 bushels of peas were harvested. Other farm products included 175 pounds of butter and thirty pounds of wool.¹⁹ Best's operation was successful enough to merit a statewide mention; *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory* listed him, not his son, as one of Bull Head Township's nine successful farmers in 1884.²⁰

Benjamin Best died in 1890. The following year Mary A. Exum, his sister-in-law, purchased the house and acreage from Benjamin W. Best's executors.²¹ She apparently rented the house to James Hiram Best, the eldest of Benjamin and Susan's children, as he is listed in the 1896 *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory* as one of fifteen prominent farmers (and the only Best) in the Appletree community, which this northern edge of Bull Head Township was then called.²² Mrs. Exum sold the house and 100 acres to Paul M. Best in 1902.²³ Three years later Paul Best had a family reunion at the Benjamin W. Best House, and five of B. W. Best's surviving sons—Wyatt P., George D., James Hiram, Benjamin W., and J. Robert—attended the event and are documented in a family photograph taken at the house's front entrance.²⁴ By the mid-twentieth century the house had been sold out of the Best family.²⁵

The Benjamin W. Best House was threatened by destruction in 1997 when its owners decided that their tract needed more farmland and that the then-vacant house was superfluous. Following intervention by Preservation North Carolina, Osmond and Mary Betty Kearney purchased the house in 1998 and, because it could not remain on its original site, moved the house that April to its current location ten miles south.²⁶ No period outbuildings had survived, and little was left on the original

¹⁹ United States Census, microfilm of manuscript census records (population and agriculture schedules), Greene County, North Carolina, 1880.

²⁰ Levi Branson, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, 1884* (Raleigh: Levi Branson, 1884), p. 340.

²¹ Greene County Register of Deeds, Book 33:213. Also Hinnant, p. 227.

²² Levi Branson, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, 1896* (Raleigh: Levi Branson, 1896), p. 304. There are no Bests listed as farmers in Bull Head Township in this year, nor the next year.

²³ Greene County Register of Deeds, Book 40: 223. Paul M. Best, a grandson of Benjamin W. Best, appears in the 1905 documentary photograph of family descendants gathered on the porch.

²⁴ Bill Murphy, who was the first Principal Investigator of the Greene County MPDF, obtained a print of the documentary photograph but did not cite his source. The photograph was also published on page 151 of *Wayne County Heritage* (1982), and was contributed by a family descendant. See survey file for a copy, and list of persons.

²⁵ Greene County Register of Deeds, Books 383:492, and 94:513.

²⁶ Mrs. C. Osmond (Mary Betty) Kearney, Snow Hill, NC. Conversation with Penne Smith [Penne Smith Sandbeck], April 30, 1998.

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site, as trees and buildings had been demolished earlier that year. In its new location, the house stands less than two miles southeast of the Henry Best I House and approximately three miles west of the Best-Harrison House, a turn-of-the-nineteenth century dwelling constructed for another descendant of Henry Best.

Architectural Context

The Benjamin W. Best House is an intact and rare surviving example of vernacular Greek Revival style as interpreted by Greene County's carpenters and builders. It stands comfortably among the range of Greek Revival domestic architecture found in eastern North Carolina. This style first appeared in North Carolina during the 1820s in sophisticated domestic and public buildings such as Hayes Plantation in Edenton and the Mordecai House and the State Capitol in Raleigh. William Nichols, the architect of these particular buildings, utilized plates published in Stuart and Revett's 1762 and 1790 editions of *Antiquities of Athens* as inspirations for his Greek Revival designs. It was not until the 1830s, however, that Greek Revival influence was evident in North Carolina's upper middle-class domestic architecture. Few of eastern North Carolina's Greek Revival style dwellings adopted the temple form; instead, most utilized a symmetrical plan with a center hall and low hip or gable roof.²⁷ Many houses built during this period embody both Federal and Greek Revival style elements copied from popular pattern books, including Asher Benjamin's *Country Builder's Assistant* (1797), *American Builder's Companion* (1806), and *Practice of Architecture* (1833), and Owen Biddle's *Young Carpenter's Assistant* (1805).²⁸ With the passage of time, Greek Revival style in North Carolina became less academic as it "trickled down" to the middle classes.

The earliest manifestations of the Greek Revival in Greene County were in the homes of its most prosperous residents. A series of houses built in the 1850s illustrate a variety of interpretations of the Greek Revival style. The 1850s Speight-Bynum House (NR 1992), located in the Walstonburg vicinity, is a two-story, double-pile, frame, hip-roof Greek Revival house with corner pilasters and a full-width, hip-roof, one-story, front porch. Like the Benjamin W. Best House, the Speight-Bynum House has a center-hall plan and a double-leaf entry framed by sidelights and a transom. The interior of the Speight-Bynum House is characterized by tall baseboards, post-and-lintel mantels and crosssetted architraves.²⁹

²⁷ Examples of temple-front Greek Revival style architecture can be seen in Duplin, Sampson, and Cumberland counties but it is not a prevalent form in eastern North Carolina.

²⁸ Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 96, 195.

²⁹ Penne Sandbeck, "Architectural Resources of Greene County, North Carolina," draft manuscript, October 2002, p. 41.

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The William H. Edmundson House, built between 1857 and 1861 in the Lindell vicinity, is a two-story, double-pile, hip-roofed Greek Revival house with six-over-six windows, boxed cornices, corner pilasters and a full-width, hip-roofed, one-story front porch supported by square posts. The wide six-panel front door is surrounded by sidelights and a transom. The circa 1855 Grimsley Raspberry House, also known as Grimsley Hall, is an even more elaborate Greek Revival house in the Snow Hill vicinity. The two-story frame, hip-roof Greek Revival house is characterized by a two-story, pedimented portico supported by square tapered posts with arched panels. Doors with sidelights and transoms provide access to both levels of the portico and large six-over-six windows illuminate the interior. The Edward and Sallie Coward House, an 1850s dwelling situated near Ormondsville, is less elaborate than Grimsley Hall but has a comparable floor plan and degree of finish. These houses, like the Benjamin W. Best House, illustrate the widespread use and regional interpretation of Greek Revival designs in Greene County.³⁰ One comparable dwelling from this period that is no longer extant is the John Harvey House in Snow Hill Township, a two-story, hip-roof frame dwelling with a center hall plan and a one-and-a-half story rear ell.³¹

By comparison, the Benjamin W. Best House's conventionally Greek Revival features begin with the plainness of its façade, framed by its wide corner pilasters and frieze below the hip roof covering. Wide pilasters and the sidelit and transomed entrance they delineate are not unknown to period pattern books, nor are the gradations of window scale, beginning with the nine-over-nine double-hung sashes of the main block's first floor and the nine-over-six of the second. Inside, the mantelpieces are handsome and regularly-proportioned, clearly derived from a pattern book. The wide center hall with its sheathed walls and rectilinear open newel stair, in comparison to other Greene County period houses, is unusual in its sobriety and lack of curvilinear form but its austere form and generous scale owe something to stylistic precepts.

The Benjamin W. Best House shares another aspect of the county's Greek Revival heritage. A group of carpenters practiced a vernacular type of Greek Revival style in western Greene County, using a different combination of decorative elements. The circa 1855 Swift House, located in Contentnea vicinity, was a two-story, three-bay, single-pile building with a low, hip roof. Like the Benjamin W. Best House, the Swift House had distinctive two-part architraves with backband moldings and tiny cornerblocks. The same architrave treatment was used at the circa 1855 Edwards-Britt House at Fort

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

³¹ Creech, p. 292; Bill Murphy, entry for John Harvey House (Restricted Greene County files, Survey room, NC-HPO, Raleigh, North Carolina).

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Run and the circa 1790 Henry Best I House, which was updated by the early 1860s with a stylish Greek Revival entrance, embellished by those very miniature cornerblocks.³²

There are comparable houses from this period in neighboring counties. Nearly all of the corresponding antebellum dwellings once in the Appletree vicinity of western Greene (now known as Lindell) and eastern Wayne counties are gone, except for Pleasant Grove. Originally nearby in Wayne County's Eureka community, it was moved to Wayne County's Pikeville community some distance southwest in the early 1990s. Considerably altered during its rehabilitation, Pleasant Grove is a comparable, though more elaborate, frame Greek Revival hip-roof dwelling, differentiated by paired interior chimneys, a double-pile interior plan, and a smaller center hall. Lenoir County examples comparable to the Benjamin W. Best House include the Raymond Jones House, a later Greek Revival style hip-roof frame dwelling with a central portico, and the 1840s Jesse Jackson House at Jackson's Crossroads, whose one-story, columned portico with its balcony balustrade is similar to the Best's House's early portico.³³ The Joshua Barnes House in northern Wilson County, a two-story, hip-roof 1850s Greek Revival dwelling is a similar type as well. In Pitt County, the now-demolished Henry King House, a two-story, hip-roof 1850s frame dwelling in King's Crossroads with exterior end brick chimneys and a single-pile plan one room deep, was strikingly similar in form. The King House was described as an antebellum house form seen frequently in the western part of Pitt County, which, as a neighboring county, was not a great distance from western Greene County.³⁴

The Benjamin W. Best House, even with these comparable examples, is now a one-of-a-kind dwelling, being, with the William H. Edmundson House, the last antebellum house from the Appletree/Lindell area to survive.³⁵ The Best House's distinguishing features—the large center hall with its open newel stair and wide board sheathing instead of plaster—that would have appeared gauche in some coastal antebellum circles have triumphed as a rare survivor. The use of tiny, unadorned cornerblocks, a practice seen in the described group of northwestern Greene County dwellings, is another distinctive feature. The house possesses a degree of integrity of workmanship and materials exceeding most other surviving Greene County examples of Greek Revival domestic architecture from this period, capturing the plain elegance of Bull Head's antebellum society.

³² Ibid., pp. 42-43.

³³ Ruth Little, *Coastal Plain and Fancy* (Kinston: Lenoir County Historical Association, 1998), pp. 279 and 406.

³⁴ Scott Power, *The Historic Architecture of Pitt County, North Carolina* (Greenville: Pitt County Historical Society, 1991), p. 443.

³⁵ The Scott Lane House, just over the border in Wayne County, was still standing in early 1997 but roof and structural damage, in addition to years of standing vacant, were taking a grave toll on the house's condition. It is not known if any of its earlier interior finish now survives.

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And yet, recent investigation of the house reveals that much of the interior's walls, doors, baseboards, and mantelpieces were painted to resemble stone or exotic woods. The east door in the second story's south bedroom, for example, has clear traces of having been painted to simulate a curly maple finish. Likewise, sections of the center hall's sheathed walls have, upon investigation, revealed an earlier finish with a swirling pattern and the unusual juxtaposed colors of green and blue, imitating a marble pattern.³⁶ Comparable regional examples to the Benjamin W. Best House include northern Greene County's Seth Speight House, where unusual painted finishes have also survived, and two mantelpieces at the Henry Best House less than two miles north.

³⁶ Mary Betty Kearney, Snow Hill, North Carolina, conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 15, 2004.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property consists of three acres sectioned off of Greene County tax parcel number 401/476 as indicated on the enclosed tax map.

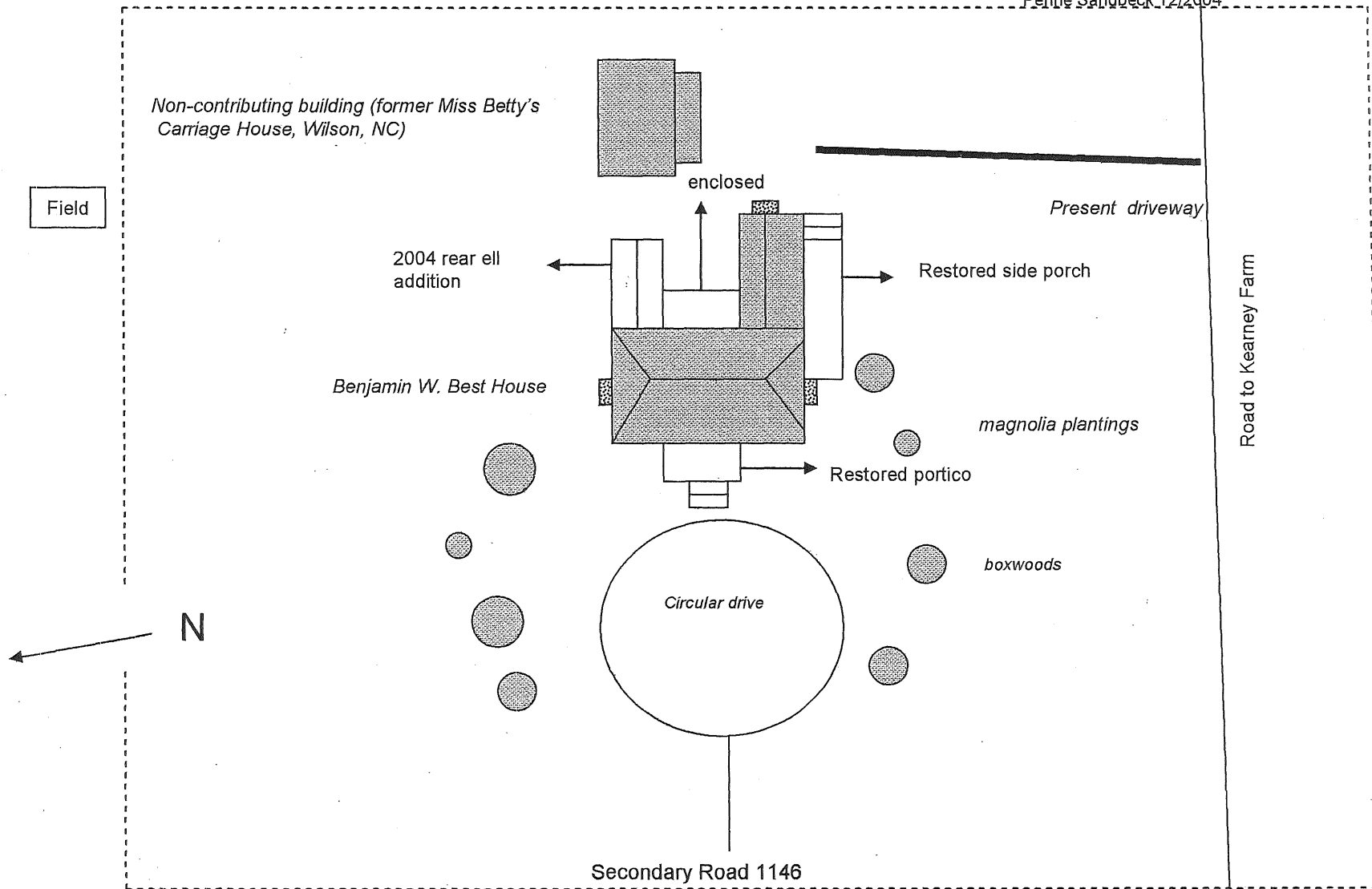
Boundary Justification

The nominated tract consists of three acres surrounding the Benjamin W. Best House and provides a historically appropriate setting for the house.

Row of Leyland Cypress Trees

Benjamin W. Best House
E. Side SR 1146, Jason Vicinity
Greene County, North Carolina
Sketch Map of Property

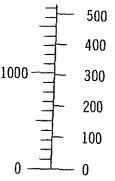
Penne Sandbeck 12/2004



Building areas in white=new addition

Dotted line = proposed boundary

(Scale: 1.5 inches equals 100 feet)

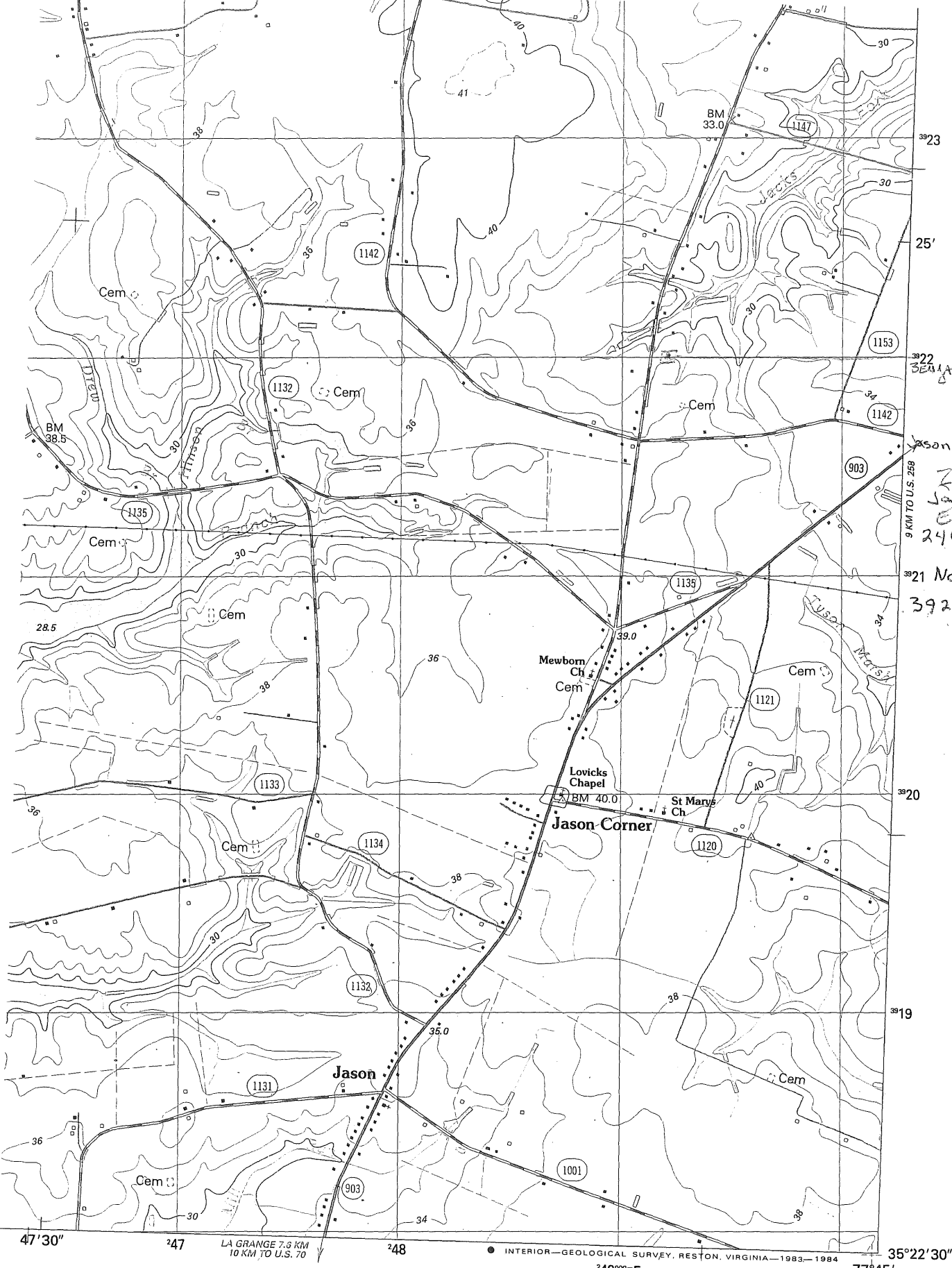


Feet	Meters
1	.3048
2	.6096
3	.9144
4	1.2192
5	1.5240
6	1.8288
7	2.1336
8	2.4384
9	2.7432
10	3.0480

To convert feet to meters multiply by .3048
 To convert meters to feet multiply by 3.2808

Jason vicinity, Greene Co, NC
 Zone 18
 Jason Quad
 EASTING
 249200

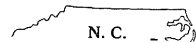
3921 NORTHING
 3922000



INTERIOR—GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA—1983—1984

ROAD CLASSIFICATION

- Primary highway, hard surface
- Secondary highway, hard surface
- Light-duty road, hard or improved surface
- Unimproved road
- Interstate Route
- U. S. Route
- State Route



(FALLING CREEK)
 5421 SW

